THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS

Review: "Betwixt and Between": The Trickster and Multiculturalism
Reviewed Work(s): Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature: A Multicultural Perspective by Elizabeth Ammons and Annette White-Parks
Review by: Lori Landay
Source: *American Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Sep., 1996), pp. 542-549
Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/30041698
Accessed: 09-07-2022 20:24 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

JSTOR

The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Quarterly*

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Sat, 09 Jul 2022 20:24:36 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

"Betwixt and Between"[1]: The Trickster and Multiculturalism

LORI LANDAY
Western Illinois University

Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature: A Multicultural Perspective. Edited by Elizabeth Ammons and Annette White-Parks. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1994. xiii + 201 pages. $35.00.

SCHOLARLY WRITING ABOUT THE TRICKSTER—AN UNRULY, CONTRADICTORY figure who appears in virtually every human culture—is bound to be paradoxical, an attempt to contain the uncontainable within academic discourse. There is the risk of defining it to death, of missing the point of the shape-shifter by trying to capture it. Fortunately, the essays in *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature: A Multicultural Perspective* do not fall into this trap; in fact, some of the more innovative essays not only provide insight into the three interwoven subjects of the book—multiculturalism, turn-of-the-century fiction, and the trickster—they also articulate the spirit of the trickster in their creativity and ludic sense of possibility. Although the collection suffers from a wobbly definition of "tricksterism" which only exacerbates many of the pitfalls of canonical revision, *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature* is nevertheless a valuable contribution to the study of tricksters in American culture.

In her engaging introduction, Elizabeth Ammons places the ten essays

Lori Landay is an assistant professor teaching American literature and film studies at Western Illinois University. She is the author of *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con-Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture* (forthcoming).

American Quarterly, Vol. 48, No. 3 (September 1996) © 1996 American Studies Association

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Sat, 09 Jul 2022 20:24:36 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

that follow in the broader context of scholarly definitions of the turn-of-the-century period of American literature. She asserts, "Like trickster, the purpose of this book is disruption" (vii)—disruption of the literary canon that excludes all but a few writers (Henry James, William Dean Howells, Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, Willa Cather). These canonical writers—and the academic conceits of naturalism, realism, and modernism that literary critics use to discuss them—are really part of one "master code" (a term Ammons borrows from Fredric Jameson) that reinforced (and reinforces) a political agenda of "the preservation and maintenance of elite white male power in the United States, which at the turn of the century (as is still true at this turn of the century) had everything to do with empire, dominance of others" (viii). Because scholars have accepted and extended the ideologically laden definitions of realism, naturalism, and modernism, Ammons suggests, they have neglected and excluded Native American, Asian American, Latino/a, and African American traditions, tales, and writers. This insight provides the basis for the "multicultural perspective" of the collection's subtitle. Similar arguments have been made in recent reconstructions of American literature that seek to go beyond the elite, white, and male biases on which most American literary and cultural criticism has been based.

Ammons argues convincingly that the "master plot" of canonical turn-of-the-century fiction pits the individual against society, with society emerging as the stronger. "A protagonist/antagonist relationship governs the battle between the rebellious, unruly desires of the individual and the coercive, controlling power of the corporate system or state, which is hierarchically organized to force the individual into obedience" (ix). At the end of the master plot, the individual either yields to the superior power of the "state/system/group" or is destroyed while resisting. The trickster, however, articulates another plot, one in which "Individual desire and group authority cohabit within a network or web of relations; the dynamic is one of interaction rather than dominance and submission" (ix). Ammons's contention that the plots of trickster tales run counter to the master plot is an intriguing corollary to similar discussions of the relationships between dominant and alternative or oppositional cultural patterns; however, the volume runs into problems where it slips away from trickster figures, plots, and tactics to consider "manifestations of trickster energy, and strategies of tricksterism" (ix).

To various degrees, the ten essays that follow explore the issues Ammons summarizes. The essays are not organized into sections but do

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Sat, 09 Jul 2022 20:24:36 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

fall into three distinct categories. Two are about individual works, six concern previously neglected or "lost" writers, and the remaining two deal with theoretical and pedagogical contexts.

The two essays that provide literary critical readings of individual works, Julia B. Farwell's "Goophering Around: Authority and the Trick of Storytelling in Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*" and Lynda Koolish's "Spies in the Enemy's House: Folk Characters as Tricksters in Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*," are both strong examples of locating and reflecting on trickster figures in literary texts within the cultural contexts of the African American literary tradition theorized by such scholars as William L. Andrews, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and John W. Roberts. Moreover, both argue convincingly that Chesnutt and Harper used black dialect specifically and language in general to address complicated issues of writing, race, and audience. These essays work because they explore clear and evocative examples of trickster figures within the specific cultural context of African American narrative and linguistic traditions.

Because *The Conjure Woman* offers two main sites of trickery (the "conjure" that people perform and the narrative structure that posits the black vernacular narrator Uncle Julius within the frame of the white "gentleman" narrator John), Farwell can make an excellent case that both "conjure" and the complex levels of narration and dialect are linked with trickery through the African American verbal mode of "signifying" described by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in *The Signifying Monkey*. Signifying is a rhetorical strategy that speaks double (or more) meanings on different levels so that the skilled signifier can both assert and contradict at the same time. Depending on the audience's linguistic and cultural background, the reader will make different meanings out of Julius's (and Chesnutt's) signifying. Farwell concludes her essay with the insight, "The text itself is a trick that Chesnutt uses to suggest that the elements of race, language, and experience—all continuous and dependent upon one another—may contribute to a sense of reality, but that reality is by no means limiting" (91).

When the other essays in the book focus on equally strong examples of trickster figures or trickery as social, narrative, and linguistic practices, they provide a valuable addition to discussions of tricksters and trickery in literature. However, when the essays rely on fuzzy definitions of "tricksterism," "trickster authorship," and "trickster energy" or do not acknowledge the artifice of culture that the trickster's antics reveal,[2] they fail to illuminate the cultural work trickery performs in America.

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Sat, 09 Jul 2022 20:24:36 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Several of the essays about lost or neglected authors also pay careful attention to specific examples of trickster figures in particular cultural contexts. The three essays on Native American writers—Jeanne Smith's "'A Second Tongue': The Trickster's Voice in the Works of Zitkala-Ša," Alexia Kosmider's "Reinventing Trickster: Creek Indian Alex Posey's Nom de Plume, Chinnubbie Harjo," and Alanna Kathleen Brown's "Mourning Dove, Trickster Energy, and Assimilation Period Native Texts"—explore the interesting topic of the first generation of Native American writers using English as part of a trickster strategy that preserves some autonomy while appearing to assimilate. All three essays discuss the social as well as linguistic categories the writers transgressed; Smith's essay is particularly insightful about the liminality articulated by Zitkala-Ša, whose *Old Indian Legends* (1901) "explores both the enabling and destructive potential of the trickster for the future of her culture" (47).

Tiffany Ana López also shows a sophisticated understanding of the complexities of the trickster in her essay, "María Cristina Mena: Turn-of-the-Century La Malinche, and Other Tales of Cultural (Re)Construction." López's critical account of one of the first Mexican American women to write in English is couched in terms of Mena's resistance to colonial and sexual oppression. By discussing not only Mena's stories, but other writings and advertisements that also appeared in *Century Magazine*, López places Mena's representations of Mexican American women within contemporaneous discourse. Although the case for Mena's protagonists as tricksters is tenuous, the essay begins with the volume's clearest critical review of scholarship on the trickster, and López's discussion of a specifically female trickster in the Chicana literary tradition is well-informed and provocative.

Yuko Matsukawa's essay, "Cross-Dressing and Cross-Naming: Decoding Onoto Watanna," is an exemplary discussion of ethnicity and the deliberate construction of a literary persona. Chinese American Winnifred Eaton created and impersonated an "authentic Japanese" writer; as Matsukawa states, "she cross-dresses for success" (110). The focus on crossing ethnic lines provides a sophisticated framework for the interpretive discussion of Eaton's pseudonym, clothing, and the *Chinese-Japanese Cook Book* she coauthored, as well as her fiction and nonfiction. Overall, Matsukawa's essay cleverly probes the cluster of issues about authenticity and cultural construction that the trickster figure so often raises. Another essay, Annette White-Parks's "'We Wear the Mask': Sui Sin Far as One Example of Trickster Authorship," concerns Winnifred's sister Edith, who

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Sat, 09 Jul 2022 20:24:36 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

adopted the Chinese pseudonym Sui Sin Far. That one sister adopted a Chinese American persona and the other impersonated a Japanese woman in her writing and life is a fascinating example of how ethnicity is culturally constructed and therefore constitutes a category with boundaries that can be crossed with trickery. Unfortunately, in contrast to Matsukawa's probing essay, White-Parks's essay does not foreground the artifice of the trickster. Instead, White-Parks's equation of tricksterism and the authorial strategies of "women and ethnic minority male writers" not only makes the concept of tricksterism so broad as to render it meaningless, it also ascribes subversive and disruptive meanings to writings by members of oppressed groups by virtue of their identity.

Eric Anderson's essay, "Manifest Dentistry, or Teaching Oral Narrative in *McTeague* and Old Man Coyote," stands out as the most interesting and daring in the collection. What at first seems at best a quirky pairing of *McTeague* and Old Man Coyote tales emerges as a sophisticated inquiry into historical consciousness. Without falsely terming McTeague a trickster, Anderson teases out the implications of the character's animalistic and disruptive tendencies when he is placed alongside Coyote; both figures, Anderson contends, disrupt "linear history" (62). The strength of Anderson's essay stems from his pedagogical context, a context in which McTeague and Coyote are living characters being read and discussed. Further, the cleverness evident in the title of the essay informs the writing as a whole: "As I bring this humanlike animal figure and this animalistic human character together, imagine if you will a classroom where manifest destiny and the grand, monumental, imperial manner of history give way to something genuinely stranger and more surprising: a classroom more like a true frontier, where cultural contacts are unpredictable and often unresolved, where the terms and lines and figures change shapes and positions constantly" (63). The points of contact that Anderson finds between the two texts, the two figures, evocatively move the reader toward his concluding arguments about the ahistorical roles both characters play in their respective contexts. As he concludes, "Bringing the trickster Coyote and the dentist McTeague into contact helps illuminate various quiet and suggestive transactions within and across texts while doing productive violence to cultural boundaries. This changefulness in turn dramatizes that cultural processes, including critiques, take many shapes and forms, and that cultural stability, whatever its motives or benefits or dangers, traffic undeniably in the power of the imagination" (77).

In "Reading Trickster; or, Theoretical Reservations and a Seneca Tale,"

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Sat, 09 Jul 2022 20:24:36 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Karen Oakes responds to novelist and critic Gerald Vizenor's assertions in "Trickster Discourse," his essay on Native American literatures, that "the trickster is postmodern" (138) and that a social science perspective obscures academic understanding of the trickster. She argues that when Vizenor claims there is no "correct reading" but only "pleasurable misreadings," he participates in the monologic tendency of postmodern literary theory that neglects the specific cultural contexts needed to understand the meanings of trickster tales. Vizenor's rejection of social science in favor of an "aesthetic" playground of postmodern signifiers relegates Native American literatures and cultures to "a reservation within dominant Western theory" (148)[3] that strips the trickster of the meanings he or she embodies in everyday life. The trickster's unruliness and corporeality—his or her "fleas" in Oakes's metaphor—have prompted some literary critics to respond with "a new, pure, theoretical flea spray in a shiny metal can perched high on the academic shelf" (152); in order to appreciate the trickster, Oakes maintains, scholars must not overlook the roles those fleas play in representations of the trickster.

Oakes's essay suggests some crucial questions the volume as a whole tends to neglect: what is the relationship between premodern trickster figures and their modern and, indeed, postmodern counterparts? How is the trickster connected to the comic and ironic traditions of a culture? What kind of academic inquiry into the cultural phenomenon of the trickster is useful? By defending social science, Oakes implicitly argues for the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to understand the complex cultural work a myth figure performs. Finally, Oakes's essay recognizes that multiculturalism, like postmodernism, is constructed by academic culture in a politically charged context.

Despite the many strengths of this collection of essays, it is limited by an unspoken view of canonical turn-of-the-century American literature as more monolithic than it is and of multiculturalism as necessarily subversive of that dominant literary and cultural model. Many of the writers discussed constructed a literary persona within the context of their class, ethnicity, and gender, but so did mainstream writers such as Mark Twain. Until a discussion of the trickster in American literature and culture includes not only so-called marginalized writers but also so-called canonical writers, it will not have a truly multicultural perspective. One of the insights the trickster offers is that there is a constant interchange between what seem like rigid categories—class, race, gender, social structures, the lawful, the profane—and that the permeable boundaries "betwixt and

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Sat, 09 Jul 2022 20:24:36 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

between" are as valid and important social and imaginative spaces as the cultural constructs they demarcate. An example like Mary Wilkins Freeman's subversion of William Dean Howells's vision of *The Whole Family: A Novel by Twelve Authors* (1907–1908)[4] demonstrates that dominant turn-of-the-century American literature is always produced by clusters of power relations among the diverse individuals and groups that create American culture.

NOTES

1. Victor Turner, *Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1967), 98. Anthropologist Turner's discussion of liminality, frame analysis (based on the work of sociologists Gregory Bateson and Erving Goffman), and performance is one of the most important for interdisciplinary work on the trickster.

2. See Andrew Wiget, "His Life in His Tail: The Native American Trickster and the Literature of Possibility," in *Redefining American Literary History,* ed. A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. (New York, 1990). The essay collection from the Trickster Myth Group of the American Academy of Religion, *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms,* ed. William J. Hynes and William G. Doty (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1993), is the best single volume on the trickster; the comprehensive bibliography is a valuable resource. For other considerations of the trickster and the artifice of culture, see Ellen B. Basso, *In Favor of Deceit: A Study of Tricksters in an Amazonian Society* (Tucson, Ariz., 1987); Allan Combs and Mark Hollander, *Synchronicity: Science, Myth, and the Trickster* (New York, 1990); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York, 1984); Karen Haltunnen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, Conn., 1982); and Robert D. Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight* (Berkeley, Calif., 1980).

3. Here Oakes's argument is similar to religious studies scholar Anne Doueihi's assertions in her contribution to *Mythical Trickster Figures,* "Inhabiting the Space Between Discourse and Story in Trickster Narratives":

> Thus the scholarly discourse about the trickster is a discourse that reflects a cultural bias; by imposing on Native American culture its own frame of concern, Western culture turns the discourse into a discourse by Western culture about Western culture, with the trickster serving only as the nominal function so that the discussion may begin. (197)

Doueihi's comment reminds us that even under the rubric of multiculturalism, the trickster can become the vehicle for a reification of Western biases. See Hynes and Doty, eds., *Mythical Trickster Figures,* 193–201.

4. Henry James, William Dean Howells, et al., *The Whole Family: A Novel by Twelve Authors,* ed. Elizabeth Jordan, introd. Alfred Bendixen (1907–1908; New York, 1986). Freeman's subversive trick shifted the novel from the quiet field of literary realism to the contested terrain of societal definitions of femininity, indeed a "facer" (as

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Sat, 09 Jul 2022 20:24:36 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

one writer termed it) that forced the writers to confront representations of older single women. By taking advantage of the autonomy given to the participating authors to change the old maid into a new woman and a trickster, Freeman's act of trickery exposed the tendency in literary realism to deny complex subjectivity to women who did not fit societal categories.

For more on this strange piece of literary history, see Bendixen's introduction as well as Elizabeth Jordan, *Three Rousing Cheers* (New York, 1938), 258–80; and Dale M. Bauer, "The Politics of Collaboration," in *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel,* ed. Laura L. Doan (Urbana, Ill., 1990), 107–22.

This content downloaded from 63.233.192.60 on Sat, 09 Jul 2022 20:24:36 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms